A Response to Kim Hensley Owens’s “In Lak’ech, The Chicano Clap, and Fear: A Partial Rhetorical Autopsy of Tucson’s Now-Illegal Ethnic Studies Classes”
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A Necessary Caveat: What follows is a response in the form of ideological critique. As a collective, our intent is to provide a view from those the author is writing “for” or about. This response is less a correction of “facts” than an ideological perspective, a view from those of us who feel it necessary to respond to Owens’s rhetorical choices.

Southern Arizona is located within the great expanse that is the Sonoran Desert—a desert that knows no borders as it spans two US states and the entire northwest of Mexico. The Sonoran Desert is one of the hottest and deadliest deserts on earth, yet each year, thousands of migrants cross this landscape and its US-imposed border in pursuit of work, education, refuge, and asylum. As one should discern, the decision to forge this treacherous crossing is not lightly made, and the devastating reality is that not all who make the journey north survive. The remains of hundreds of migrants are discovered every year, and it is the task of state appointed medical investigators to perform autopsies on those whose bodies have been declared (both in life and death) illegal. It is with this contextual framing in mind, that we write a collective response to engage in conversation and critique Kim Hensley Owens’s essay, “In Lak’ech, The Chicano Clap, and Fear: A Partial Rhetorical Autopsy of Tucson’s Now-Illegal Ethnic Studies Classes.”

As Medina and Martinez have previously stated, Arizona matters to us and is our “home place” (1). As a collective, we are intricately linked to this home place and have been witness to the Arizona Legislature’s development, passing, and enforcement of their brutal and racist anti-immigrant/Latinx laws. Yet we have also witnessed and engaged in activism that proves the resistance and resilience of those whom this anti-immigrant/Latinx
country and culture have attempted to bury. Our collective scholarship critiques the seemingly endless affronts by the Arizona legislature toward the populace, particularly SB 1070, which legalized racially profiling Latinx people “reasonably suspected” of being undocumented, and HB 2281, which, as Owens’s essay discusses, outlawed Mexican American Studies (MAS) in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). In our capacities as teacher-scholar-activists who work with other activists to resist these state-sanctioned affronts to our humanity, we write this response to Owens’s essay as a requiem for her autopsy and a demonstration of the tireless work of educators and activists who have maintained ethnic studies’ vigorous flame of life.

Beginning with the term *autopsy*, we find this declaration problematic for a few different reasons. Research about the Day of the Dead (Día de los muertos) in popular culture (Medina 2016) highlights how the Mexican holiday has roots in indigenous practices that celebrate the cycles of life, including death. In this indigenous way of knowing, death is celebrated, and the dead are remembered and celebrated. By framing her article as an “autopsy,” Owens imposes a Western lens on a program grounded on indigenous culture and knowledge such as “In Lak’Ech.” Her lens problematically declares the program dead, despite the continued work of teachers who were a part of the program and the legal cases where the final rulings were in favor of the program. Familiar phrases such as “positive correlation . . . cannot demonstrate causation” (251) speak to the empirical Western lens that dissects and invokes an Aristotelian and Burkean analysis seemingly to authorize the incorporation of Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of *nepantla* (Owens 265–6).

The metaphor of death and autopsy perhaps proves useful for analyzing the TUSD MAS program by applying something akin to forensic rhetoric; however, this interpretive framework demonstrates how Western rhetorical traditions can perpetuate colonial narratives about the communities they examine. Godwin Agboka explains how decolonial methodologies seek to redress the work of colonial projects when he says that approaches are important for revealing the ways that colonialism continues to operate and to affect lives in new and innovative ways as well as to show the unmitigated damage inflicted by past colonial practices. (298)

Within the United States, colonial historians have written indigenous people, knowledge, and culture out of historical narratives that contribute to and perpetuate what Chicana scholar Emma Pérez calls the “colonial imaginary.” To describe a program grounded on indigenous knowledge that predates Christopher Columbus as “dead” (Owens 247) seems, perhaps unknowingly, to perpetuate beliefs that contribute to the issue of invisibility.
that American Indian scholars have addressed and why Lisa King and other native scholars identify the need for rhetorical sovereignty.

While declaring the MAS program “dead” rings as somewhat premature, Owens seemingly contradicts this declaration when she explains that “MAS courses were—and remain—at the center of a battle that seems to respond to the current political climate rather than the actual curriculum” (253). She acknowledges the ongoing nature of MAS in Tucson when articulating the “movement” metaphor. Owens explains, “The term movement also brings to mind activist movements, such as the ongoing efforts to revive ethnic studies in Tucson” (248). While revive implies a resuscitation of something on the brink of death, the acknowledgment of “ongoing efforts” highlights how quick the article is to declare a conclusion that fits the Westernized colonial narrative about indigenous knowledge in the Southwest as something to be excavated or unearthed, rather than as knowledge that exists in ongoing traditions.

Though the idea of an “autopsy” for a “dead” program could be read as little more than a metaphorical framework for interpreting the educational and political struggle of the MAS program in Tucson, these choices play into inferential networks of worldviews that mark non-whites in the United States as “other.” At times, Owens makes clear claims about the program: “What was truly outlawed was a pointed, socially just curriculum that spoke to students’ identities and was helping Latin@ students achieve scholastically” (253). However, she begins by explaining that the program is currently illegal in Arizona” (247) and later references the program’s “illegal status” (248), which sensationalizes and exoticizes the program about indigenous, Mexican, Chicano culture. In 2013, Kathleen Carroll, senior vice president of the Associated Press and executive editor of the Associated Press Stylebook, explained on the AP blog, “The Stylebook no longer sanctions the term ‘illegal immigrant’ or the use of ‘illegal’ to describe a person. Instead, it tells users that ‘illegal’ should describe only an action, such as living in or immigrating to a country illegally” (qtd. in Colford). Owens’s use of illegal to describe the program does not follow the Associated Press’s logic of using the word to describe an action, which becomes evident in how the use of illegal reflects negatively on how the program is framed. These language choices undermine the experiences of people in the program, such as how students “loved and felt empowered by MAS classes and teachers” (Owens 255). We appreciate that Owens draws attention to how Tom Horne, John Huppenthal, John Pedicone, and Mark Stegman “protect the status quo and current ethnic and racial hierarchies” (255). However, the use of terms such as illegal continues to perpetuate the “unconscious racism” that normalizes dehumanizing language used to discuss non-whites in the United States (Pendergast qtd. in Owens 255).
Calls for decolonial methodologies come from a concern for the communities where the research sites are located. Agboka advocates for decolonial approaches as a part of research on intercultural communication because, he explains, they “[require] that researchers question their assumptions and engage in self-critique of their assumptions about research” (319). He makes the concession that this advocacy may be found in qualitative methods research guides and scholarship; however, he makes the point about the deliberate application of these practices to remain conscious of how this research will impact the community. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith articulates the specific need of reciprocal respect when working with indigenous communities because of how colonial research practices and Western knowledge erase and disregard the interests of the populations studied. Smith explains, “In First Nations and Native American communities there are protocols of being respectful, of showing or accepting respect and reciprocating respectful behaviours, which also develop membership, credibility and reputation” (15). One of the main purposes of this response is not so much an argument for particular research methodologies, but rather an opportunity to bring the voices of the actual people of the journal’s scholarship into the conversation.

Reviewing some of Owens’s cited facts reveals some confusion in her narrative or perhaps a lack of fact-checking. Owens’s statement that “Acosta’s class was frequently visited by Arizona politicians such as Tom Horne” (261) is especially worth comment. While MAS classrooms were indeed repeatedly visited by auditors, and once by John Huppenthal, Tom Horne’s absence from these spaces should be noted. Horne’s oft-repeated line is that not only did he not need to visit the MAS classrooms to understand that they were toxic, but indeed that visiting them would be folly because, as he stated on the witness stand in 2017, “These teachers were so ideological that they would tell you whatever you wanted to hear as far as reforming the curriculum, and then behind closed doors they would do whatever they wanted to do” (*González v. Douglas*). The fact that Horne was adamantly not a frequent visitor to MAS classrooms is not a small, throwaway detail. Rather, it represents a key piece of information for understanding the years of public and legal debates that followed the passage of HB 2281. Much of the discussion about the legislation concerned the fact that these classes were attacked by politicians, such as Horne, who not only neglected to sit in on the classes they sought to eradicate, but who found the very idea of doing so pointless.

Owens discusses HB 2281’s reliance on the idea of the individual, which is indeed an integral part of the story. However, the solution she provides, namely to determine how to
“better educate not only students, but also politicians” (266) in fact reinforces a key idea underpinning the legislation and its support. The racism she acknowledges as complex relies on ideas supporting a white American cultural superiority that highly values liberal individualism. An important outcome to the prevalence of this line of individualist thought is that responses to educational inequality that address systemic racism and its outcomes become incredibly difficult to mobilize. Individualist responses move to the forefront, placing blame for failure on individuals. Individualist fixes cannot deeply reassess how systems operate, who they work for, or what inequalities they uphold. Instead individualist fixes to inequality work to make “underachieving” students catch up within the system as-is. This kind of liberal individualism is what led former state superintendent John Huppenthal to say in court in 2017 that his goal was to reverse the achievement gap through fixes such as new educational software and personal time spent tutoring and teaching “at-risk” youth. Yet when asked on the stand whether a program that “both increases the passing rates on AIMS tests of Mexican American students and increases the graduation rate of Mexican-American students” would be considered successful, Huppenthal responded, “Not necessarily. The philosophical issues can’t be set aside just based on the academic associations” (González v. Douglas). The individualist framework does not make space for tackling the system head on or for reimagining how we learn or even for examining how racism is written into schools and the education process.

To suggest that we move forward by simply better educating individual politicians does two things: 1) It reinforces the idea that it is not the system that is flawed and needs to be changed, but rather that we simply need to alter the thinking of individuals who are ignorant to the truth of the matter and, 2) it ignores the true objections to MAS that became apparent when reviewing the ways in which politicians discussed their opposition to the program in trials, legislative hearings, and anonymous blogs. They feared that the students would see the historical trajectory that led to the inequality that many of them see playing out in their daily lives, and rather than blaming individuals (their parents, their teachers, themselves), they would blame a power structure and seek to dismantle it. An education in history that brings to the forefront histories of injustices, violence, resistance, and resilience is what then-Representative Montenegro referred to as “teaching victimology” (AZ Cong. Senate Comm. on Education Accountability and Reform 2010), what Huppenthal referred to as pushing “an oppressed/oppressor framework” (Gonzalez v. Douglas), and what Senator Sylvia Allen referred to as highlighting “the hate, and the bad, and the terrible,” leading students to see themselves as “victims” (AZ Cong.
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Senate Comm. on Education Accountability and Reform, 2010). In an individualist framework, students are trained to see themselves as individuals instead of as members of a group. This works to make students internalize historical and contemporary violence done in the name of colonization and maintenance of white supremacy as either bad individual luck or the result of individual failings. They can then be expected to change \textit{themselves} to better work within the dominant framework rather than imagine a different framework not designed to uphold dominant group advantage. This is not as simple as saying that racist white politicians are afraid of practices that they view as reminiscent of “a cult,” in the words of TUSD governing board member Mark Stegeman (Arizona Office of Administrative Hearings 31). These politicians worry that minoritized youth will see that, not only is the system failing them, but it was never designed with them in mind and those youth will do something to alter it. While Owens’s piece pushes her audience to consider the implications of individualist rhetoric in both politics and pedagogy, suggesting that this is an issue that can be dealt with by finding new ways to educate politicians loses sight of the fact that this is not merely a question of ignorance, but one of ideology.

Indigenous people and our knowledges have been declared “dead” since first contact, and we continue to be declared dead and worthy of an autopsy for Enlightenment-informed observational “science.” In terms of audience, we urge Owens to consider the multiplicity of audience beyond the imagined white \textit{College English} audience, and to consider the effect of her death and autopsy framing for an audience of indigenous-Latinx identified ethnic studies scholar-activists—some of whom Owens interviewed and cited within her essay. For this audience, the framework of death and autopsy is strongly reminiscent of the discovery of dead migrant’s bodies in the Sonoran Desert that are in turn examined in the name of scientific observation and the cataloguing of statistics. We urge Owens and her essay’s readers to consider those who have been breaking their backs working to tell the story of MAS and ethnic studies. Many of the educators and activists fighting to keep the flame of ethnic studies alive, many of whom Owens cites in her essay, have, in the process of this activist work, experienced the dissolution of personal and familial relationships. Some have had to see their way through unhealthy coping mechanisms for the very survival of our bodies, minds, and the cause. Some have endured actual death threats over the labor and \textit{corazón} involved in efforts to keep this program alive. The point, though, is that we are not the dead Indians this author declares us to be. We are not the dead Indians Cortez, Columbus, and every other colonizer since then have declared us to be. And declaring ethnic studies dead and worthy of an autopsy, no
matter how benevolent and humane the autopsy may be, plays into the tired old colonial narrative of the dead indigenous peoples.

What we offer here is another side to the story—a story about how ethnic studies lives. There is always another story, and the educators and activists who have been with this struggle from the start should have their perspectives shared as well. In response to this declaration of death and to show how very alive MAS and ethnic studies are, we conclude with a Mexican proverb: “Quisieron enterrarnos, pero no sabían que éramos semillas / They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.”

Works Cited


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Kim Hensley Owens Responds

I am glad that there are many people writing about and acting in solidarity with those who created, fought for, and now are working to revive the MAS program after the courts overturned ARS 15-112 and earlier rulings that had forced the program to shut down. I am also grateful to College English for providing a space for discussion of this important topic. Although grateful for the engagement with my work, I must respectfully disagree with the characterizations the respondents make of that work. The authors and I agree about the importance of methods that center on careful, continuous inclusion of the voices of those most intimately involved with the MAS program. The
critiques the authors make are almost exclusively about word choice, rather than methodology.

That is not to say that words don’t matter. As a rhetorician, I believe words matter and so chose words that would have an impact on readers, words that would highlight the outrageous behavior of Arizona courts and politicians, words that would illustrate the damage done to the Mexican American Studies people and program. I chose words that made sense to me as a writer and researcher who was impelled into this work by my past and a desire to try to make sense out of what did not make sense.

The authors draw attention to the context of the Sonoran border and the horrific deaths of many people who attempt to cross the desert from Mexico into the United States. That tragedy is real—and growing (Carranza), and it is one I have personally fought in various ways outside my academic work. The experiences of migrants and Mexican American and Indigenous people who have long lived on both sides of what is now the US-Mexico border are central to the conflict over the MAS program, but that does not mean that any reference to death, including the end of the MAS program, inevitably invokes or minimizes the layers of violence at the border.

This piece was titled over three years ago, when the entire MAS program was completely shuttered; many of its teachers had scattered, as mentioned in the article and yes, much personal tragedy was involved. By then, a different curriculum had been implemented in its place in some schools, and in all but one case these classes were being taught by entirely different teachers than had been in MAS. At the time of the interviews, the small group of teachers formerly connected to MAS who had been working together on the culturally relevant classes was no more. The end of MAS was wrong, but it was an end. When a reviewer questioned my metaphors because of the then-ongoing fight—which is referenced in the article—to overturn the ruling, I described what I’ve mentioned here, the details from my interviews, and the fact that MAS had not been allowed to be offered for over five years. The teachers interviewed were all in various stages of mourning the loss of MAS. Even as many were fighting to bring it back, they mourned. Their mourning, along with the other facts, led to and supported my metaphorical choices, and the journal accepted that explanation. That ARS 15-112 has since been overturned (which happened long after my article was accepted for publication) is an absolute win for Arizona and for Tucson students. I was overjoyed and also somewhat astonished that the fight was successful: I did not anticipate a pre–Supreme Court win for this case, and I was not even confident of a Supreme Court win, given its current composition. I’m delighted that the program can regenerate and that some of the former MAS teachers are working to recreate the MAS program.
That said, the new MAS program that will now be built will not be the same as the one that existed previously. It will include elements of the former MAS, elements of the current culturally relevant replacement curriculum, and new elements not yet imagined: hopefully it will be wonderful, but it cannot be the same.

The authors argue that my use of the word *autopsy* plays into a colonial narrative of dead Indigenous people. They even suggest that through that language choice I am calling all Indigenous people, including the authors themselves, dead. This reading is not at all warranted by the text of my article.

*Rhetorical autopsy* is used because it reflects very accurately what I was doing as I went about this work. Even before travelling to Tucson to interview former MAS teachers, I was doing long-distance research into the ruling from Rhode Island. I was digging into a curriculum that was no longer being taught and trying to understand what had happened both to and within MAS by examining pieces of data from those intimately involved in MAS, by piecing together accounts from outsiders, and by tracking curricular influences some of those involved didn’t even know about. I was seeking information that was difficult to access, asking questions about origins and past practices, and trying to make sense of incomplete and conflicting stories. Along with some of my interviewees, I shed tears over the MAS program, what happened to its teachers, one of its former students, the community it had engendered and which was destroyed, and the general state of my home state. I researched this topic not because I “wanted” to—my work up to this point had been largely in the realm of feminist and medical rhetorics (which may in part explain my being drawn to a medical metaphor in the title of the piece)—but because this project *would not let me not write it*. I had to bear witness to it—yes, as a white woman, and yes, as a non-inhabitant of Tucson at the time. I don’t think those aspects of my identity and location disqualify me from writing about MAS, nor do I think the work I did is incorrectly termed an autopsy. Autopsy derives from the Latin *auto* (self) and *optos* (seen): yes, it has a medical meaning, and yes, I meant that, too, but at its core, the word means to personally observe. The research I conducted was personal, and I personally observed as much as was possible given that this program was not active—was not *live*—at the time of my research. For all of these reasons, I stand by the phrase *rhetorical autopsy*. My work celebrated and publicly memorialized MAS. My rhetorical autopsy was a scholarly offering very much in honor of MAS.

One point the authors bring up is a mistake I regret and for which I take full responsibility. I used the phrase “politicians such as Tom Horne” when discussing some politicians who visited one former MAS teacher’s class. It’s true that Tom Horne did not himself visit any MAS classes. In early drafts of the article, there was more information...
about Tom Horne’s disdain for and dramatic refusals to even step foot in an MAS class, but that level of detail did not, in the end, seem necessary to the piece. The line the authors quote should have read “politicians such as John Huppenthal, former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction.” Even with countless re-readings I did not notice the error and apologize that it was not correct in the published version of the piece. While it is too late to fix the published paper version, I will ask the College English editor if there is a way to correct that line or add a corrective footnote in the online version of the piece.

A native Tucsonan, I was educated in and have educated students in its public schools: I have much personal experience with and much to say about the interrelationships among language, race, ethnicity, and power in those schools. Relevant here is that for my undergraduate English and Spanish Education degree at the University of Arizona, I student-taught ninth and eleventh grade English at Tucson High in the fall of 1996. The MAS program was not yet in existence—the program began to formally coalesce in 1997—but elements of what became its curriculum were fomenting when I was teaching there and were very much a part of my training as an English teacher.

My connection to the pre-MAS curriculum helped form my priorities as a teacher-scholar, but what I relied on for this project was neither that very early connection nor my own voice: this project needed many voices. Among the fourteen people I interviewed were multiple former MAS teachers who identify as Indigenous. The article is full of their voices. They are quoted from whenever possible, in an effort to share a part of their story with an audience they would not typically target. Not to speak for them, because they all speak for themselves quite powerfully in defense of their program in other venues, but to frame their voices and stories in the context of a rhetorical analysis relevant to the large field of English studies.

Beyond 75- to 90-minute interviews and writing a piece that privileges those voices and stories, I took care to include participants after my analysis was written as well, without overburdening them. After this article was written and long before it went to press, it was sent to every cited interviewee who had given me their email address—two interviewees had not. They were asked for their feedback should they want to give it. Only two responded: one white, one Indigenous. Both were pleased with the piece. The Indigenous respondent wrote, “I’m extremely grateful for your work. This is a critical layer of MAS and our story.” My methods and methodology privilege the voices of those who were actively involved in MAS. Those participants were very much partners in and supportive of my research and writing on this topic, both in general and in terms of this specific article.
With limited space, I will not continue to argue every language choice the authors take issue with: the above should illustrate that except for one honest, if unfortunate, mistake, the interpretations the authors make are not reasonable readings given the context and content of the article. Their interpretations are not reflective of the love, passion, and intellectual rigor that drove the work, nor are they reflective of the takeaways any of the other people who have read the piece have shared with me—including those who are themselves represented in the text.

The authors’ critiques are also, significantly, not critiques of my methodology, which was in keeping with standards of the field and IRB approved. That said, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, such standards are not enough. One way she suggests that researchers work to overcome the challenges of research in a colonial context is through mutual respect, which she defines as “a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct” (125). All of my contact with all participants illustrates our mutual respect. I took great care in my interactions with interviewees. Interviews were scheduled at locations and times that best matched their needs. I carefully crafted sometimes-delicate questions and various elements of interviews were kept on or off the record, as asked. Participants were thanked orally and with coffee, and I followed up each interview with one or more thank you emails. I offered participants a chance to weigh in before the piece was published. With much to say and limited space, I did not describe every such ethical-methodological detail in the article, nor did any reviewer or editor suggest I should do so.

The authors suggest at the end of their piece that my article is complicit in attempts to bury MAS and Indigenous people. I respectfully submit that the entire point of my article is to elucidate details of MAS, to quite literally bring into the light details that others had buried and that would not have been visible without my research. I worked with Indigenous MAS teachers (as well as those of different ethnic identities) to accomplish this research. The fact that several interviewees specifically expressed appreciation for my doing research on MAS that relied on their own stories and voices suggests that they did not feel I was attempting to bury them, either. The respondents suggest that the “educators and activists who have been with this struggle from the start should have their perspectives shared as well”: to that, I say, my article does that by including at every turn the voices of those who were part of MAS from its inception.

Near the end of my article, I wrote that if there are two worldviews similar to views of clocks—a Western view moving clockwise and an Indigenous view moving counter-clockwise:
the goal [of MAS] was not to see one clock hand instead of another, but to enable students to see the multiple stories and perspectives that could coexist with and be layered over or under one another. Unfortunately, politicians and those afraid of MAS saw just one clock hand replacing another, and going in what seemed to them the wrong direction. (266)

The authors’ response to my article suggests that perhaps they only see one clock hand at a time, seeing my work as moving only in one direction, when it very much moves in both simultaneously. Does it have a Western lens? Yes. Does it also consistently and respectfully include non-Western perspectives to expand what that lens could otherwise show? Yes.

This article is far from the only or final word on what happened to the MAS program. It in no way attempts to speak for or shut down the voices of anyone involved. I hope that many writers with varying connections to MAS and different lenses will continue to examine what happened and what comes next. There is room for multivocality about this issue; there is room for scholars in this and other fields to publish about MAS; there is also room for more generous and fair responses to scholarly work than the one these respondents have brought to my article.

**Works Cited**

